

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 06166

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TAGS: PINT, PN

SUBJECT: HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION MEETING

REFERENCE: PANAMA 5958

SUMMARY: THE "HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION" INSTITUTED BY TORRIJOS MET FOR THE FIRST TIME ON AUGUST 23. BY SEPTEMBER 16, IT IS TO MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE LEGALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND OTHER POLITICAL REFORMS. THE MEETING, HEADED BY GOVERNMENT ADVISER ROMULO ESCOBAR AND EDUCATION MINISTER ROYO, WAS ALSO ATTENDED BY TWO REPRESENTATIVES EACH OF THE PANAMANIAN COMMUNIST PARTY, THE BROAD FRONT OF PROFESSIONALS, THE LIBERAL PARTY, THE MOVEMENT OF NATIONAL LIBERATION, AND THE AGRARIAN LABOR PARTY. THE LARGE PANAMENISTA PARTY OF FORMER PRESIDENT ARNULFO ARIAS AND SEVERAL OTHER SMALLER OPPOSITION PARTIES DECLINED TO PARTICIPATE. ALTHOUGH THE COMMISSION IS THEORETICALLY OPEN TO DISCUSSION ON ANY TOPIC, ESCOBAR REPORTEDLY PLACED OFF LIMITS ANY CHANGES IN THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM FOR PRESIDENT, VICE-PRESIDENT, AND COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES. END SUMMARY

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1. THE "HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION," RECENTLY CREATED BY GENERAL TORRIJOS TO DISCUSS AND MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS ON REFORM OF PANAMA'S POLITICAL STRUCTURE, MET FOR THE FIRST TIME ON AUGUST 23. THE FOUR-HOUR SESSION RESULTED IN THE CREATION OF TWO SUBCOMMITTEES WHICH ARE SCHEDULED TO MEET ON AUGUST 25, ONE TO DEAL WITH

THE LEGALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE SECOND WITH OTHER POLITICAL REFORMS. THE COMMISSION ALSO AGREED TO A TIME LIMIT ON ITS DELIBERATIONS, SETTING A SEPTEMBER 16 DEADLINE FOR COMING UP WITH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

2. PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING ON BEHALF OF THE GOVERNMENT WERE ROMULO ESCOBAR BETHANCOURT, ADVISER TO THE CHIEF OF GOVERNMENT, AND ARISTIDES ROYO, EDUCATION MINISTER. (FOREIGN MINISTER GONZALEZ-REVELLA IS A MEMBER OF THE COMMISSION AS WELL, BUT WAS NOT PRESENT.) ROYO IS SERVING UNDER TWO HATS, IN THAT HE IS ALSO PARTICIPATING AS ONE OF THE ORGANIZERS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S NEWBORN PARTY, THE "DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONARY PARTY." OTHERS ESSENTIALLY ON THE GOVERNMENT SIDE WERE TWO REPRESENTATIVES EACH FROM THE PANAMANIAN COMMUNIST PARTY (PARTIDO DEL PUEBLO, PDP) AND THE BROAD FRONT OF PROFESSIONALS (A GROUP WHICH EMERGED DURING THE OCTOBER 1977 CANAL TREATY PLEBISCITE DEBATE AS A PRO-TREATY OUTFIT.)

3. THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION IS REPRESENTED BY THE NATIONAL LIBERAL PARTY, THE MOVEMENT OF NATIONAL LIBERATION (A SPLINTER OF THE LIBERAL PARTY DATING FROM THE EARLY 1950'S), AND THE AGRARIAN LABOR PARTY, AGAIN WITH TWO REPRESENTATIVES EACH. BOTH THE

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MOVEMENT OF NATIONAL LIBERATION AND THE AGRARIAN LABOR PARTY, ACCORDING TO A RELIABLE LIBERAL PARTY SOURCE, HAVE SUPPORTED THE LIBERAL PARTY AND ITS CANDIDATES IN THE PAST AND PROBABLY WILL WORK TOGETHER WITH THE LIBERALS IN THE FUTURE. THE THREE GROUPS HAVE COORDINATED THEIR APPROACH TO THE HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION AND, AT LEAST AT THE OUTSET, ARE DEALING WITH THE GOVERNMENT TYPES IN A UNIFIED MANNER.

4. THE OTHER OPPOSITION PARTIES WHICH MAKE UP THE SO-CALLED "UNIFIED OPPOSITION," HAVE NOT TAKEN THE GOVERNMENT UP ON ITS OFFER TO PARTICIPATE IN THE COMMISSION. THUS, THE LARGE PANAMENISTA PARTY HEADED BY ARNULFO ARIAS, THE FORMER PRESIDENT OF PANAMA WHO RETURNED FROM TEN YEARS EXILE IN JUNE, IS NOTABLY ABSENT. REPORTEDLY, THE DOOR TO THE COMMISSION REMAINS OPEN, BUT IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT THE PANAMENISTAS OR OTHER SMALLER OPPOSITION PARTIES WILL CHANGE THEIR MINDS. THEY SEE THE COMMISSION AS A MANEUVER TO INDUCE THE PEOPLE TO THINK THAT GENUINE REFORMS ARE TAKING PLACE, AND THEY ARE CONVINCED THAT NO SIGNIFICANT STEPS TOWARDS DEMOCRACY WILL ACTUALLY BE TAKEN. MOREOVER, A COUPLE OF

THE PARTIES HAD DEMANDED THAT THE GOVERNMENT DEFINE BEFOREHAND THE GROUND-RULES OF THE COMMISSION, AND THAT THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL GUARD IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS BE CLARIFIED. THESE DEMANDS WERE NOT MET.

5. THERE HAVE BEEN SOME GOOD INDICATIONS OF WHAT WILL COME OUT OF THE HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION. AT THE LEAST, WE CAN EXPECT A RECOMMENDATION FOR LEGALIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES, WITH SOME FIGURE SET AS THE MINIMUM

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NUMBER OF ADHERENTS NECESSARY FOR FORMATION OF A PARTY, AND SOME ARRANGEMENT WHEREBY THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES (WHICH HAS NO REAL LEGISLATIVE POWERS) WILL HAVE A ROLE IN THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS. IT SEEMS DOUBTFUL THAT THE COMMISSION WILL BE ABLE TO GO VERY MUCH FARTHER. SUPPOSEDLY, THE COMMISSION IS OPEN FOR DISCUSSION OF ANY TOPIC. HOWEVER, ESCOBAR REPORTEDLY DREW A FEW BOUNDARY LINES AND GAVE THE COMMISSION A CLEAR MESSAGE TO THE EFFECT THAT IT DOES NOT REPEAT NOT HAVE THE RIGHT TO CHANGE, INTER ALIA, THE ELECTION SYSTEM EITHER FOR PRESIDENT AND VICE-PRESIDENT (BOTH ARE SELECTED IN INDIRECT ELECTIONS BY THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY) OR FOR THE COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES. THUS, IT WOULD APPEAR THAT TWO OF THE BASIC GOALS OF THE OPPOSITION PARTIES -- PROVIDING FOR DIRECT ELECTION OF PRESIDENT AND VICE-PRESIDENT AND FOR A PROPORTIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY -- HAVE BEEN RULED OUT FROM THE START.

6. NEVERTHELESS, THE WORD FROM THE LIBERAL PARTY IS

THAT THE FIRST DAY'S SESSION WENT VERY WELL.
ACCORDING TO A LIBERAL PARTY SOURCE, THE GOVERNMENT
REPRESENTATIVES DID NOT WALK INTO THE MEETING WITH
SPECIFIC PROPOSALS OR A SPECIFIC AGENDA IN HAND.
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THUS, THE LIBERALS AND THEIR COMRADES IN THE MOVE-
MENT OF NATIONAL LIBERATION AND THE AGRARIAN LABOR
PARTY, WHO HAD COORDINATED THEIR PLANS FOR PARTICI-
PATION IN THE COMMISSION, WERE ABLE TO GIVE SOME
DIRECTION TO THE MEETING. IN THEIR OWN STATEMENT
TO THE COMMISSION, THE LIBERALS DENOUNCED THE
TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT AS A DICTATORSHIP, REJECTED THE
IDEA OF GRANTING ANY SPECIAL POWERS (SUCH AS THOSE
TORRIJOS NOW HAS AS CHIEF OF GOVERNMENT) TO ANY
INDIVIDUAL, AND WARNED THAT THE COMMISSION REPRESENTED
THE GOVERNMENT'S LAST OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE A REAL EFFORT
TO DEMOCRATIZE THE POLITICAL SYSTEM -- IF THIS EFFORT
FAILED, THE RESULT WOULD BE VIOLENCE. THE LIBERALS
ARE WELL AWARE THAT THE COMMISSION MAY TURN OUT TO
BE A MEANINGLESS EXERCISE. IF SUCH IS THE CASE, THE
LIBERAL PARTY WILL WITHDRAW FROM THE COMMISSION AND
DENOUNCE IT AS A FARCE. OTHERWISE, AS LONG AS IT
APPEARS TO BE A SINCERE EFFORT ON THE PART OF THE
GOVERNMENT TO INSTITUTE DEMOCRATIC REFORMS, THEY
WILL PARTICIPATE.

7. TO CLARIFY THE OVERALL SCENARIO A BIT, AT THIS
POINT THE HIGH-LEVEL COMMISSION IS EXPECTED TO MAKE
ITS RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM BY SEPTEMBER 16. ANY
PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION WILL THEN
BE PRESENTED TO THE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION.
ACCORDING TO NEWS REPORTS, THE COMMISSION WILL PASS
THEM ON TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR DISCUSSION,
AND SUBSEQUENTLY, THEY WILL BE DISCUSSED AT THE
PROVINCIAL LEVEL BY THE PROVINCIAL COORDINATING
COUNCILS. IN THE LAST WEEK OF SEPTEMBER, THE
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY WILL MEET AGAIN TO TAKE UP THE
AMENDMENTS IN PLENARY SESSION. FINALLY, THE NEW
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ASSEMBLY TO TAKE OFFICE IN OCTOBER WILL RATIFY THE
AMENDMENTS. (UNDER ARTICLE 140 OF THE CONSTITUTION,
THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY "MUST APPROVE, WITH OR WITHOUT
MODIFICATION, OR DISAPPROVE THE AMENDMENTS TO THE
CONSTITUTION SUBMITTED TO IT BY THE NATIONAL LEGISLA-

TIVE COUNCIL. AMENDMENTS MUST BE RATIFIED BY THE
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY WHICH TAKES OFFICE IN THE FOLLOWING
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